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"INSTANT CONTEXTUALISATION" AND READERLY INVOLVEMENT IN ALAN BENNETT'S 'BED AMONG THE LENTILS'[1]

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Résumé : Cet article entend montrer la manière dont Alan Bennett parvient à donner vie à des mondes fictionnels de manière concise et efficace. Les lecteurs / spectateurs des monologues se trouvent d'emblée plongés dans un univers qui leur semble familier. Deux stratégies narratives centrales semblent expliquer ce type de réception. L'auteur a en effet recours à ce que je propose d'appeler des « îlots narratifs », c'est-à-dire des saynètes qui permettent de sympathiser avec le narrateur. L'expérience des lecteurs est en outre sollicitée par Alan Bennett : des schèmes mentaux sont renforcés, d'autres modifiés ou précisés et certaines constructions lexico-syntaxiques sont utilisées afin de suggérer un sens implicite.

Mots-clés : contexte, îlots narratifs, schèmes, réception, constructions syntaxiques

Introduction

Talking heads is a series of twelve monologues written by Alan Bennett (1988 / 1998) and filmed for BBC television. The speakers of these monologues tell their stories straight to the camera and very little movement or gesture is

[1] Cet article, accepté par le comité de lecture, est issu de la communication présentée en mai 2011 dans l'atelier de stylistique lors du 51ème Congrès de la SAES à Paris Diderot et Paris Sorbonne Nouvelle.

involved. As a genre, these monologues stand in between short stories and dramatic pieces. In his introduction to *Talking Heads*, Alan Bennett (2007, 39-40) explains:

> […] there is a single point of view, that of the speaker alone with the camera, and with the rest of the story pictured and peopled by the viewer more effort is demanded of the imagination. In this sense to watch a monologue on the screen is closer to reading a short story than watching a play.

The main impression conveyed by these monologues is one of closeness, even intimacy, with the speakers. The technique used explains this particular reader-response. However, these ordinary and seemingly artless narrators recount episodes of their lives, mostly set in northern England, more precisely around Leeds. Given the ordinary nature of the characters' lives, it would not be surprising if viewers found it difficult to engage in such narratives. Nevertheless, Alan Bennett renders this northern world and its inhabitants familiar, which enables viewers to empathise and even sympathise with these ordinary folk. The author provides contextual information both concisely and thoroughly in the fashion of a cartoonist who tells a story with a few strokes of his pen (see Jobert 2010). This "instant contextualisation" is of course not specific to Alan Bennett as all *in medias res* beginnings strive to imprint this notion on the reader's mind and many other texts achieve the same effect through different means. What I am suggesting, however, is that Alan Bennett does it very effectively and in a very specific way. At this stage, Michael Toolan's (1996, 5) comments on the alleged dichotomy between text and context are worth quoting:

> Both text and context are ontological derivatives, an after-the-fact sense making, and just what is deemed to be the text and what the (relevant) context is decided locally, from within the interactional situation at hand. In other words, text and context finally do not exist at all, except situationally. And, since future situations cannot be fully known in advance, what will be text, what context, cannot be reliably or scientifically predicted either.

We know relatively little about the way readers[2] process texts. What is certain, however, is that processing a text (whether written or spoken) involves both bottom-up processing and top-down processing. A reader engages in a text with the knowledge of the world s/he has stored away (top-down) and at the same time gathers text-specific knowledge (bottom-up). Separating these two types of processing is a *post-hoc* analytical method as both occur simultaneously (Jeffries & McIntyre 2010, 167). The purpose of this article is thus to show how Alan Bennett achieves this "instant contextualisation" by relying both on

[2] In this presentation, I shall use "viewers" and "readers" interchangeably as *Talking Heads* can be watched on television as well as read.

top-down and bottom-up processes. I shall use Text World Theory (see Werth 1999, Semino 1997 or Gavins 2007) in order to establish a distinction between a text-world and what I propose to call a "narrative island". This part is mainly devoted to how readers become involved in the narrative and make the fictional context theirs (bottom-up processes). I then explore how schemas as well as specific lexical and syntactical arrangements enable readers to process texts by calling upon readers' previous experience (top-down processes). In both cases, however, what matters is the constant hovering between text and context.

"Narrative islands"

Although the twelve monologues of *Talking Heads* form a whole, each monologue can be read / watched independently. "Bed among the Lentils" (*BAL*) is the monologue of a vicar's wife, Susan, who is an alcoholic and has an affair with an Indian shop-keeper. The discourse world, which encompasses the discourse participants, is rather straightforward with the speaker, Susan, addressing the viewer. However, she hovers between two different modes: a confession mode (addressed to an invisible friend, i.e. the viewers) and a self-reflecting mode (addressed to herself, the viewers eavesdropping). This dual audience principle is crucial to prevent the monologue from being too contrived and protracted and these constant shifts between two modes add to the fluidity of the piece. The overall impression is that of a one-to-one conversation, albeit one-sided, thus creating some proximity with the speaker.

The formal division of the monologue conveys the impression of the passing of time. In *BAL*, there are five parts and each is very distinct. In the script, these parts are signalled by minimalist stage-directions indicating the location of the speaker and the time of day (*kitchen /evening; side-chapel / afternoon; kitchen / morning; vestry / afternoon; drawing-room / evening*). In the filmed version, each change is accompanied by music and the screen goes black. This division into different parts generates a developing sense of familiarity as viewers not only follow the speaker's train of thought but they also follow her in space and time. The reader is plunged into a fictitious universe and follows the narrative flow of the speaker who evokes other characters and situations. The first text-world opens up on other text-worlds in which the speaker plays an essential role. Viewers thus undergo a double deictic projection. It would be fair to say that this process is similar to what happens when reading a first-person narrative. However, the audio-visual medium lends life, reality and depth to Susan's speech. It gives the impression that a character from the fictional world is talking to a character in the real world, giving viewers the illusion that the two worlds are actually merging.

In *BAL*, the tenses used oscillate between the preterite and the present. The choice between the two tenses can sometimes be mapped onto the discursive mode utilised by Susan: the present tense is used for the self-reflective mode ("[…] why is a vicar's wife expected to go to church at all?" (72)) whereas the preterite is used to recount different episodes ("The woman served me. Didn't smile" (72)). More interestingly, the same hesitation is at work even when the events reported belong to the same time slot.

Although this is usual in naturally-occurring narratives (Labov 1972), it creates shifts from one text-world to the next thereby enhancing deictic projection yet again as it plunges the reader one step further into the fictional world. The consequence of these deictic pushes (Stockwell 2002) is that parts of the monologue appear somewhat detached from the rest of the narrative and look like semi-autonomous chunks of discourse or "narrative islands". They represent new text-worlds but it could be argued that we somewhat lose track of the original text-world although they remain thematically connected to the rest. More precisely, the original text-world loses its immediate relevance and the deictic coordinates of the preceding deictic field decay. In cognitive terms, the foregrounded "narrative island" becomes the "figure" and the rest of the text is perceived as being the "ground". Figures tend to have "well-defined edges" and are "more detailed" than the ground (Stockwell 2002, 15). Indeed, "narrative islands" stand apart and leave a mark on viewers who remember them as vivid visual scenes. Several "narrative islands" can be found in *BAL*, including the "after service ritual", the "lunch with the bishop", the "love scene with the Asian grocer" etc. They depict very concrete situations in which objects – like props – play a crucial role, thus adding to the physicality of the scenes[3].

The largest of these "narrative islands" is "the altar incident". In this sequence, Susan is doing some flower arrangement in the church with a couple of ladies and her alcoholism is revealed or, more precisely, publicly acknowledged. The textual demarcation of this narrative island is clear as it starts with the time reference "On this particular morning" (76) and finishes with the end of the third part of the monologue. The tense used is the present although direct speech is usually introduced by verbs in the preterite. This discrepancy creates another narrative ambiguity as the frame narrative is in the preterite with a "narrative island" in the present tense. The narrative distance created by the use of the preterite when reporting speech bestows a touch of objectivity upon an otherwise entirely subjective account. The "altar episode"

3 The titles of the monologues often refer to concrete objects as well. For instance, "A Chip in the Sugar" or "A cream-cracker under the settee".

finishes with the simple present, followed by some hedging (modal auxiliary) before moving back to an objective mode with a series of reported actions in the preterite:

> I **come** round […] (78)
> […] I **drift off** again and **may have said** […] (78)
> When I **woke up** […] (78)
> I **couldn't find** a thing in the cupboard so **I got** the car out and drove into Leeds […] **I sat** in the shop […] Then **I felt** a bit wanny […] when **I woke up** […] etc.

These narrative islands are of course related to the main story but are potentially autonomous as their very structure shows. Their narrative impact is therefore stronger than that of mere digressions. The altar episode follows Labov's six-part structure typical of fully-formed oral narratives:

- **Abstract**: What, in a nutshell is the story about?
- **Orientation**: Who, when, where?
- **Complicating action**: What happened and then what happened?
- **Resolution**: what finally happened?
- **Coda**: That's it, I've finished and am 'bridging' back to our present situation.
- **Evaluation**: so what? How is this interesting?

In *BAL*, the *abstract* is stated from the start: "[…] to do the altar and the lectern" (76). The *orientation* is made explicit: "On this particular morning"; Susan, the speaker, Mrs Frobisher and Mrs Belcher; at the church. The *complicating action* is the argument between Susan and the two ladies about flower arrangement. The *resolution* is Susan's collapse because of alcohol. The *coda* is her coming round with the shift in the tenses. *Evaluation* is not a sequence on the same plane as the abstract, the complicating action or the coda, but something more ubiquitous in a given narrative. Toolan (2001, 151) defines it as follows:

> Evaluation consists of all the means used to establish and sustain the point, the contextual significance and tellability, or reportability, of a story. It may take many forms and appear at almost any point in the telling, although it is often particularly clustered around the 'hinge' or climactic point of the action, just before – and in effect delaying – the resolving action or event.

It is useful at this stage to mention the notion of "performance" to refer to "a certain type of particularly involved and dramatized oral narrative" as *Talking Heads* clearly falls within this category. Toolan (2001, 161) explains:

> To perform a story is to furnish one's addressees with more vivid and involving experience of that story, while exploiting special performance features and resources for highlighting the story's main point.

Several specific devices can be found in this type of narrative including direct speech and asides which are copiously used in *BAL*. In the following examples, the speaker leaves the time reference of the episode in order to express her point of view on the situation in hand whilst retaining the same tense:

> "Is that blood Veronica?" […] "Well", **says Mrs Shrubsole, reluctant to concede to Mrs B on any matter remotely touching medicine**, "it could be, I suppose". (78)

The speaker's point is to highlight the petty rivalry between the two ladies while keeping a seemingly impartial stance. Impartiality collapses in the following example but is counterbalanced by humour that swiftly takes over:

> "Why?" She smiled sweetly. "Do you have any preference?" The only preference I have is to **shove my chrysanthemums up her nose** but instead **I practise a bit of Christian forbearance** and go stick them in a vase by the lectern. (76)

The Conversational Historic Present (CHP) is often used in such narratives. Grammarians tend to regard the use of CHP as a mere orality marker or as a means of turning a narrative into a vivid and immediate description. Toolan (2001) argues that the CHP also facilitates the intervention of the teller as shown. Another function of the CHP is to focus the reader's attention on certain parts of the narrative, thus creating foregrounding effects.

In this "narrative island", readers progressively understand that Susan is drunk. At this stage they are likely to remember the slight hints left in the text ("I root out a vase or two from the cupboard where Geoffrey keeps the communion wine." (76)) but the contrast between the scene depicted and the very articulate woman telling the story with distance and humour is striking. The dexterity of the speaker is undoubtedly foregrounded here and what matters is the tellability of the story rather than the factual elements. This "narrative island" seems to interrupt the main narrative but it is not likely to be perceived as a hindrance by viewers because of the sense of jubilation in the telling. The pettiness of the two competing ladies is the target of satire and Susan's problem with alcohol seems to be brushed aside as a mere source of comedy. Viewers are thus plunged into Susan's consciousness and are only too prompt to accept her version of the story.

Tinkering with schemas

In Alan Bennett's monologues, certain apparently innocuous words, phrases or situations recall similar situations in the real world and help viewers to process the monologues. In cognitive terms, certain expressions trigger schemas enriching the viewing / reading experience with knowledge exterior to

the text. With just a few words, Alan Bennett manages to evoke very rich and detailed contexts.

Jeffries & McIntyre (2010, 127-8) define schemas as follows:

> The term schema refers to an element of background knowledge about a particular aspect of the world. We have schemas for people, objects, situations and events.

Several headers have to be present in a text to trigger a schema in the reader's mind (see Jeffries & McIntyre 2010, 129). In *BAL*, the "sermon at church" schema is triggered by several headers: a precondition header ("It was Holy Communion"); an instrumental header ("Geoffrey" i.e. the vicar) as well as a locale header ("the side-chapel"). The monologue then becomes more specific:

> Geoffrey kicks off by apologising for his failure to defrost the church. (Subdued merriment.) Mr Medlicott has shingles, Geoffrey explains, and, as is well known, has consistently refused to initiate us lesser mortals into the mysteries of the boiler. (Helpless laughter). (70)

This small paragraph elicits a fair amount of background information. The whole episode is based on the knowledge that churches are often cold and that heating problems are not infrequent. It is not so much a "sermon at church" schema but only the beginning of one, dubbed the "kick off" by Susan, with its traditional token jokes. The congregation's complacent reaction to the vicar's joke, indicated within brackets, is part of the schema and is indirectly criticised by Susan (flat intonation contour on "subdued merriment" and "helpless laughter"). Depending on the reader, such a passage either reinforces an existing schema, i.e. it confirms the reader's knowledge or it adds new information to an existing schema. Semino (1997, 155) adds:

> If a text reinforces the reader's schemata, the world it projects will be perceived as conventional, familiar, realistic and so on.

In *Talking Heads*, the schemas triggered tend to reinforce readers' existing schemas and, as such, contribute to readerly involvement and to the appreciation of the narrative. However, Alan Bennett does not merely exploit schemas in this traditional fashion. He plays with existing schemas and pushes them to extremes. The vicar's description of his wife's work to the Bishop is a case in point:

> Mr Vicar jumps in with a quick rundown of my accomplishments and an outline of my **punishing schedule**. On a typical day, **apparently**, I kick off by changing the wheel on the Fiesta, then hasten to the bedside of a dying pensioner, after which, having done the altar flowers and dispensed warmth and gratitude to sundry parishioners en route, I top off a thrill-packed morning by taking round Meals on Wheels …. Somehow – 'and this to

> me is the miracle,' says Geoffrey – 'somehow managing to rustle up a delicious lunch in the interim', **the miracle somewhat belied by the flabby lasagne we are currently embarked on**. (73)

The schema of the prototypical perfect vicar's wife is narrated at length for the benefit of the viewer whilst it is denied by Susan herself ("punishing schedule", "apparently", "the miracle somewhat belied …"). The schema is so perfect that it verges on caricature. The play on the recognition of a particular situation followed by adherence to or distancing from can sometimes go even further:

> The Sermon was about sex. I didn't actually nod off, though I have heard it before. Marriage gives the OK to sex is the **gist of it,** but while it is far from being the be all and end all (**you can say that again)** sex is nevertheless the supreme joy of the married state and a symbol of the relationship between us and God. So, Geoffrey concludes, when we put our money in the plate it is a symbol of everything in our lives we are offering to God and that includes our sex. **I could only find 10p**. (70)

The sex-and-the-church schema is swiftly summed up ("the gist of it") and more or less directly criticised ("you can say that again" and "I could only find 10p") and only the schema refreshment (the relationship between the collection and sex) is spelled out. The viewer is both satisfied to recognise an existing schema and intrigued by the unusual schema refreshment. What is particular, however, is that this schema sets Susan thinking and she imagines what the parishioners actually offer to God:

> No fun being made a present of the rare and desiccated conjunctions that take place between Geoffrey and me. Or the frightful collisions that presumably still occur between the Belchers. Not to mention whatever shamefaced fumblings go on between Miss Budd and Miss Bantock. 'It's all right if we offer it to God, Alice.' "Well, if you say so Pauline". (71)

Viewers having experienced sermons in church might very well be familiar with this type of lateral thinking triggered by a theme touched upon by the clergyman and its very indirect relation with the current situation. A further fictional step is taken when Susan reports an imaginary conversation between two parishioners. Beyond the characterisation of the two devout lesbians, the purpose of such inventiveness is mere literary distraction (see Stockwell 2001).

The input of the reader in terms of context relies heavily on his / her past experiences that are triggered by references to ordinary situations. Alan Bennett's craft is precisely not to dwell on existing schemas but to build on them in order to increase the impact on viewers while making the reading process an enjoyable one. Schema recognition enriches the reading experience as the onus is not on the text alone to create and give life to the fictional universe but also on the reader's past experience.

Clichés, hackneyed metaphors and incongruous juxtaposition

The lexical and syntactic choices made by Alan Bennett are also based on the tension between familiarity and surprise. I shall focus on three aspects: "presenting others' speech and thought", "naming and describing" and "equating and contrasting" (Jeffries 2010). Just like schemas, certain lexical or syntactic choices convey ideologies that Jeffries (2010, 5), in *Critical Stylistics*, defines as follows:

> […] ideas, and in particular those ideas that are shared by a community or society which are termed *ideologies*, are a very important aspect of the world that we live in, and they are, of course, communicated, reproduced, constructed and negotiated using language.

Exposing ideologies will contribute to the understanding of how context is indirectly constructed during the reading process. An author, willingly or unwittingly, often uses ideologies that often pass for received ideas. In such cases, readerly recognition is enhanced as an entire context is indirectly and often surreptitiously called upon.

♦ "Presenting others' speech and thought"

Quite often, Susan takes up short expressions or phrases that are attributable to specific people or that voice the beliefs of (part of) the community. In such cases of verbal borrowing, the quotation marks do not indicate that Susan reproduces other people's words faithfully but that she distances herself from the opinions expressed. These words allegedly uttered outside the text give reality and currency to the fictional world. Indeed, speech presentation presumes a certain degree of faithfulness to an original utterance. It therefore creates the fiction that in the text world, there actually *was* an anterior discourse. In the following examples, the phrase repeated by Susan is presented as the vicar's set phrase to refer to the way his parishioners treat him: "[…] as he puts it, **'spoiling him rotten'**". (78) and the way he talks about Susan's alcoholism: "[…] they've all prayed over what he calls **'my problem'**. (83). These are all the more readily processed by readers as the expressions are clichés. In the following example, Susan repeats the cliché used by the parishioners to describe her husband ("His schoolboy good looks"). The first quote, on the other hand, seems to be her own creation:

> What 'Who's Who in the diocese of Ripon' calls 'his schoolboy good looks'. (71)

The connection between "Who's Who" and the diocese of Ripon is here presented as a contradiction in terms and Susan clearly distances herself from this local microcosm. Some expressions neatly capture a typical behaviour

which implies an entire context. The following examples refer to the attitude of the clergy who try to be more relevant to the people:

> He did his 'underneath this cassock I am but a man like anybody else' act. (71)
> One of the 'Christianity is common sense' brigade. (73)

These stock phrases echo expressions readers have already been confronted with because they have been used extensively. In both cases, "act" and "brigade" are clear markers of critical evaluation.

♦ "Naming and describing"

Jeffries (2010, 19) explains:

> […] the main ideological importance of noun phrases is that they are able to 'package up' ideas or information which are not fundamentally about entities but which are really a description of a process, event or action.

In *BAL*, the "fan club" metaphor is used extensively to refer to the parishioners. This apt metaphor evokes the behaviour of fans and maps it onto the behaviour of the parishioners. The implications "unpacked" by the reader are that the old biddies actually behave at church like enthusiastic schoolgirls at a pop concert:

> The fan club were running around in small circles. (71)

Using a noun phrase rather than stating that the lady-parishioners behave like fans makes it more difficult to dispute and presents it as a *fait accompli*. What is more, in *BAL*, the fan club metaphor is often used in conjunction with a military metaphor, which entrenches the first metaphor even further in the reader's mind:

> This gives the fan club the green light to **invade** the vicarage. (78)
> The fan club is **on red alert**. (80)

The discrepancy between the two domains as well as the embedment adds to the incongruity of the established relation. The fan club metaphor gives rise to another metaphor which is extended in the monologue. The metaphorical construct works in a manner somewhat reminiscent of syllogisms. Viewers readily admit that old biddies share some qualities with fans. They also readily recognise the fact that fan clubs share certain features with a military task-force. As a consequence, because these two metaphors work, the lady-parishioners are compared with para-military personnel and viewers play along with what the text is constructing.

The collision of idiomatic expressions sometimes pushes the reader's capacity of inference too far and once again, what seems to matter is the literary creation and the tellability of the piece rather than the actual meaning:

> From being **a fly in the ointment** I find myself transformed into **a feather in his cap**. (83)

There is an implicit comparison between two entities that are not usually compared as idiomatic expressions tend to be used autonomously. We are close to mixed metaphors here and mixed metaphors are always linguistically enjoyable, whether they are used on purpose or not. The meaning remains transparent but the reader's attention is arrested by the stylistic deviation and the actual meaning of the utterance becomes more or less irrelevant.

♦ "Equating and contrasting"

Alan Bennett is both generous and inventive with comparisons and contrasts especially when the two entities compared have little in common. Because we are cognitively programmed to think in terms of comparison (up /down; light / dark etc.) we process comparison almost naturally without always being aware of it. As Jeffries (2010, 52) states:

> […] texts have the capacity, frequently used, to set up *new* synonymies and oppositions, sometimes between words that we would *never* relate to each other out of context, and sometimes between phrases or clauses, or even whole paragraphs.

For instance, *BAL*, opens with the following statement, uttered by the vicar's wife:

> **Geoffrey**'s bad enough but I'm glad I wasn't married to **Jesus**. (70)

Comparing an ordinary person with Jesus is unusual enough but if the comparison is detrimental to Jesus, it signals that the system of values is somewhat upset. Both Geoffrey and Jesus are positioned on a cline of "badness", taken for granted by the speaker and presented as such to the viewer. The statement claims to be non-controversial as Susan, as it were, counts her own blessings. Similarly, a cline of "competitiveness" is activated in the following statement:

> If you think **squash** is a competitive activity try **flower arrangement**. (75)

What is unusual here is not that squash should be regarded as competitive but the suggestion that flower arrangement should be more so whereas it is usually associated with ameliorative notions of taste and delicacy.

However, the comparison is effective not because it is incongruous but precisely because it conjures up images of old ladies trying to gain the favours of the vicar of the parish and to enhance their self-image. This all-too-common behaviour is instantly taken on board by the viewer and mapped onto the fictional world which therefore becomes far more precise than it would have been if the competition between the ladies had been described at length.

Like metaphors, comparisons are sometimes extended. One of the most common syntactic triggers for opposition is the sequence "X not Y" (Jeffries 2010, 55). This structure is used twice by Susan who comments on Mrs Shrubsole's decoration of the altar:

> I said, "Mrs Shrubsole. This is **the altar of St Michael and All Angels. It is not The Wind in the Willows**". (77)

The contrast between the altar of the church, the name of which is given in full to add to the solemnity of the statement, and a famous children's book is striking. Because of the way negation works, readers instantly picture a forest peopled by friendly and familiar animals and map this picture onto a flower arrangement which will be perceived as slightly overdone. After the world of childhood, another input space is conjured up swiftly:

> "**This is not a flower arrangement. It is a booby trap**. **A health hazard**. In fact,' I say in a moment of supreme inspiration, 'it should be labelled **HAZFLOR**". (77)

The progression from "booby trap" to "health hazard" is reinforced by the brevity of the sentences and culminates in the coinage "HAZFLOR". The same type of contrast is achieved in the following example. However, this time it is not between something that is expected to be harmless and something extremely dangerous, but between something childish and something serious:

> "It's all very well to transform the altar into **something out of Bambi** but do not forget that for the vicar the altar is **his working surface**". (77)

Referring to the altar as a "working surface" creates another disjunction between what is expected and what the text actually creates and here "working surface" seems to be somewhat lacking in religiousness. Alan Bennett's style here is very close to what Sherzer (1951) calls the "gnomic code" which is a method of "putting language on display" (quoted by Burton, 1980, 61) by drawing attention to the creative process. The expressions used are both clichéd and quite inventive. As Sherzer explains:

> Because of their semantic, phonological, lexical and syntactic properties, gnomic expressions are immediately recognizable in written texts and in oral discourse.

The tools used to account for Bennett's specific ways of triggering contextual elements do not exhaust all the possibilities and hardly do justice to the author's style. However, they are quite apt to pinpoint how Alan Bennett plays with language in his monologues.

Conclusion

Readers / viewers feel they have always inhabited Alan Bennett's fictional worlds because of the constant play between recognition of and deviation from well-known patterns. The enunciative situation of his narrators incites viewers to adopt their vantage points and mind- styles. The repeated deictic shifts that result in "narrative islands" add to the sense of involvement. Readers are furthermore prompted to participate as their previous experiences are called upon by quasi-prototypical scenes or behaviours they construe automatically (schemas). At the same time, certain lexical and syntactic manipulations enrich the familiar context even further.

The images created by Alan Bennett are often humorous and work as comic epiphanies which bestow on readers and viewers instant understanding of the world depicted. However, humour, omnipresent as it may be, does not conceal the sad, nitty-gritty reality of his characters' lives but serves as an antidote against melodrama.

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